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Title: The Riddle as Argument: Zarathustra's Riddle and the Eternal Return of the Same.¹

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Response to this paper by: [James Lawler](#)

Riddle me this. When is a door not a door? Answer. When it's ajar.

Riddles, from the most simplistic to the most complex, beg for solution. Nietzsche was a great user of riddles² often referring to himself as a natural born "guesser of riddles" (Gay Science 343). In Zarathustra, he says rather confidently that he will solve life's riddle: "Thus life once taught me; and with this I shall yet solve the riddle of your heart..."³ Throughout his published writings, Nietzsche also made numerous references to the famous riddle of the sphinx which Oedipus answered⁴ although Nietzsche appears to have adapted this particular riddle through his reading of it in Emerson's Essay, "On History". According to this idiosyncratic reading, the sphinx is now obliged to solve her own riddle.⁵ In the text of Zarathustra, the case can be made that life, like Emerson's sphinx, not only poses her own riddle⁶ but is subsequently obliged to solve it.

The Visual Riddle

Twice in the text of Zarathustra, we are told that the vision of the gateway shared by Zarathustra and the dwarf in the section entitled "On the Vision and the Riddle" is itself the riddle that has to be solved. Two almost parallel passages make this point clear. To you, the bold searchers, researchers, and whoever embarks with cunning sails on terrible seas -- to you, drunk with riddles to you alone I tell the riddle that I saw, the vision of the loneliest (On the Vision and the Riddle, Z III, 2).

You who are glad of riddles! Guess me this riddle that I saw then, interpret me the vision of the loneliest. For it was a vision and a foreseeing. What did I see then in a parable? And who is it who must yet come one day? Who is the shepherd into whose throat the snake crawled thus? Who is the man into whose throat all that is heaviest and blackest will crawl thus? (On the Vision and the Riddle, Z III, 2).

While the characterization of this vision as "the vision of the loneliest" in both of the above-quoted passages has a specific and important meaning to be discussed later, it is anything but self-evident exactly what it is about this vision that constitutes its being a riddle? In other words, while it seems to be obvious that the solution to the visual riddle is ER, it is anything but clear what the actual riddle is which is being posed.

"Behold this gateway, dwarf!" I continued. "It has two faces. Two paths meet here; no one has yet followed either to its end. This long lane stretches back for an eternity. And the long lane out there, that is another eternity. They contradict each other, these paths; they offend each other face to face; and it is here at this gateway that they come together. The name of the gateway is inscribed above: 'Moment.' But whoever would follow one of them, on and on, farther and farther -- do you believe, dwarf, that these paths contradict each other eternally?" All

that is straight lies, the dwarf murmured contemptuously. All truth is crooked; time itself is a circle (On the Vision and the Riddle, III.2, §2).

What is the riddle seen or envisioned at this gateway? Is it problematic that there are two eternities and not just one? Is it a conundrum perhaps that two eternities are able to meet? Is it puzzling that the two pathways each run to eternity but in opposite directions? Or is it simply enigmatic that eternities that run in opposite directions are able to meet at all and at some time? One thing for certain is that there is no textual evidence in the above passage, or in the text of Zarathustra for that matter, to support Lampert's claim that the dwarf has misunderstood the nature of "Time itself is a circle" thinking that the dwarf meant time was cyclical rather than circular.⁷ According to Lampert, the dwarf's interpretation of the visual riddle of the gateway is that similar, rather than identical, things return during long cyclical years of becoming akin, one supposes, to perennial Dionysian rebirths each and every spring. But while I think that there is no reason to believe Lampert that the dwarf confuses cyclical time with circular time, there might be some reason to believe that Nietzsche does.

The Verbal Riddle

The visual riddle of the gateway, however, is not the entire story and it is probably not even the most important part of it. There is yet another riddle posed in the text of Zarathustra that has the eternal return of the same as its only solution. And the text spends an extra-ordinary amount of time developing not only the various elements of this riddle, as well as the framework which supports these elements, but also in developing the specific keys which, when taken together, eventually bring about the solution to the riddle with the thought of ER. Like a good mystery novel or who-done-it (not to mention prefaces to German philosophical works), the master key to solving this riddle through ER is actually offered early in the Prologue and certainly well before the explicit introduction of the thought of ER in Part III.

The verbal riddle that I have in mind is one posed by the soothsayer who is, as is well-known, a thinly disguised and thoroughly pessimistic, Schopenhauer.⁸ "And I saw a great sadness descend on mankind. The best grew weary of their works. A doctrine appeared, accompanied by a faith: "All is empty, all is the same, all has been!" (The Soothsayer II.19).

The first element which Zarathustra offers to frame this riddle has to do with the will or the will to power which debuts as a philosophical concept in Zarathustra. Throughout the text, the will is constantly characterised as both a "liberator and joy-bringer" (Upon the Blessed Isles II.2; On Redemption II.20). "Indeed, in me", Zarathustra says, "there is something invulnerable and unburiable, something that explodes rock; that is my will" (The Tomb Song II.11). The will is described variously as "inexorable" (The Night Song II.9) and "indomitable" (Upon the Mount of Olives III.6); the will is "the shatterer of all tombs" (Emphasis mine. The Tomb Song II.11) and as "something unstilled, unstillable"; it always "¼wants to be voiced" (The Night Song II.9). It is also established in the text that the will, in the past at least, has always been successful in liberating whatever has been imprisoned

or entombed. But will the will always be so successful? Is there anything that the creative will cannot do?⁹ We should suspect not if only to follow Nietzsche's principle that "...life must overcome itself again and again" (On the Tarantulas II.7)¹⁰ That life always overcomes herself again and again, albeit by crooked and contradictory means (On Self-Overcoming II, 12) is the vital secret which life herself whispered so lovingly into Zarathustra's ear.¹¹

The second element in fixing the riddle is the overman and the overman's relation to the future of humanity. In the Prologue to Zarathustra (2), we are reminded that God is dead and, as a consequence, in the cold, dark vacuum created by God's absence, Zarathustra is now in a favourable position to teach the coming of the overman especially given his fervent belief that humanity is something that has to be overcome. "Dead are all gods: now we want the overman to live" (On the gift-giving virtue I.22 § 2). It therefore becomes Zarathustra's self-imposed task to teach the overman and thereby to make the coming of the overman the meaning of the earth (Prologue 3) and the (final) goal of mankind.¹² Most importantly, we are told that the overman should be our highest hope and the highest thought of life itself (On War and Warriors I.10).¹³ While Nietzsche does not always use his terms and metaphors unequivocally, even his most central ones, the phrase "highest hope" as a label identifying the future overman remains the same throughout the text. But alas, Zarathustra declares, there has never yet been an overman (On priests II.4). But is there anything to prevent the overman from being our future and highest hope? Indeed, there is. And this is where the three, seemingly independent, elements of the soothsayer's riddle need to be unpacked.

All is empty.

The first phrase, "All is empty", is undoubtedly an explicit reference to nihilism which entails that nothing whatsoever has any meaning or value. Nihilism, however, seems to have at least two distinct origins. First, nihilism seems to be an inevitable consequence of God's death, that is, a profound and wide-spread belief which issues from the broken links which formerly constituted the great chain of being. The connection between God's death and nihilism in this regard is made very succinctly in "The Madman" (Gay Science 125) where Nietzsche first announces God's (un)timely demise.

The second origin of nihilism stems more specifically from Zarathustra's (and the world's) initial and wholesale acceptance of the soothsayer's understanding of the implications which follow the nature of time as linear and as a consequence, it merges into the third phrase of the soothsayer's riddle: "All has been". I think the second or middle phrase, "All is the same" is what makes the essential connection between the other two phrases and will therefore postpone discussion of it for a moment.

All has been.

Historically, linear time has always been regarded as the great annihilator either visually, as Chronos devouring his own children, or philosophically in Parmenides' evaluation of appearances or Plato's evaluation of particulars vis-à-vis Reality or eternal Forms. In nuce,

everything in linear time is fragile to time.

The now and the past on earth -- alas, my friends, that is what I find most unendurable; and I should not know how to live if I were not also a seer of that which must come. A seer, a willer, a creator, a future himself and a bridge to the future... (On Redemption II.20).

The soothsayer's philosophy of pessimism is predicated precisely on the acceptance of time as linear. "And now cloud upon cloud rolled over the spirit, until eventually madness preached. "Everything passes away; therefore everything deserves to pass away". (On Redemption II.20).¹⁴ This consequence of linear time is the basis of Zarathustra's initial despair in "The Tomb Song" which culminates in the horrific dream sequence described in "The Soothsayer" when life, which has been overcome by time, looks at Zarathustra from out of the glass coffins of the past (II.19).

Listen to the dream which I dreamed, my friends, and help me guess its meaning. This dream is still a riddle to me: its meaning is concealed in it and imprisoned and does not yet soar above it with unfettered wings. I had turned my back on all life, thus I dreamed (The Soothsayer II.19).

All the visions and consolations of Zarathustra's youth had passed away. How could Zarathustra endure their passing and how could his soul ever break free from the tomb of linear time? (see The Tomb Song II.11)¹⁵

...the will itself is still a prisoner. Willing liberates; but what is it that puts even the liberator himself in fetters? "It was" -- that is the name of the will's gnashing of teeth and most secret melancholy. Powerless against what has been done, he is an angry spectator of all that is past. The will cannot will backwards; and that he cannot break time and time's covetousness, that is the will's loneliest melancholy (On Redemption II.20).

This, indeed, this alone, is what revenge is: the will's ill will against time and its "it was" (On Redemption II.20).

All is the same

The fragment, "all is the same", which I think is not coincidentally the middle phrase, is what holds the riddle of the soothsayer together. Indeed, I would suggest that without this middle phrase and what it does to advance the drama, there is no riddle for ER to solve.

Zarathustra claims that the spirit of revenge manifests itself as the will to equality: "Revenge sits in the souls of all preachers of equality" (On the Tarantulas II.7). Revenge wants everything to be the same. And

revenge, we recall, is nothing more than the will's ill will against time and its "it was", that is, against the fact that "all has been" (See On Redemption II.20). Why this is so problematic, and the essential element both in the riddle and its possible solution, is two-fold. On the one hand, we are informed of the following challenge: "¼that man be delivered from revenge, that is for me the bridge to the highest hope, and a rainbow after long storms" (On the Tarantulas II.7). In other words, Zarathustra's claim is that overman is possible (that is, his future-oriented, highest hope is possible) only if we can cross the bridge by overcoming the spirit of revenge. But revenge manifests itself not only in the will to equality which seems to be under our control but, given the nature of linear time and the fact that the will is powerless to will backwards, it seems to be impossible and therefore quite beyond the will's power. So why bother at all? Hence, the advent of nihilism. After all, "It is all the same.... Nothing is worthwhile. You shall not will" (On old and new tablets III.12, §16). But what is really being argued here is that, given the nature of linear time, the future (and therefore the overman as our future hope and goal) has no value because eventually, like everything else ("all is the same"), the overman will be pulled out of the future, through the gateway of the present, and into the past where it too can no longer be retrieve, re-lived, or altered and, as a consequence, like everything else in linear time ("all is the same"), it has no genuine value. It means that Zarathustra's highest hope, the overman, is at best a trivial pursuit since the future must inevitably come to share the same negative value as the past. overman is a future requirement if the earth is ever to have a meaning, a human meaning; 2) the past has no meaning or value precisely because it cannot be redeemed or retrieved, the will being unable to will backwards;¹⁶ 3) but if the future is essentially the same as the past insofar as the future, like the present and past, will be pulled through the gateway of the moment, then the future like the past also has no meaning and value; 5) therefore only those who are able to redeem the past, who can be delivered from the spirit of revenge (which seems to be impossible given the linear nature of time) will be able to deliver the hope of the future (overman). The riddle of the soothsayer is solved by the thought of eternal return precisely because Zarathustra needs to first redeem or deliver the past in order to keep his future hope viable and significant. But he said as much already in the Prologue: "I love him who justifies future and redeems past generations..." (4).

To redeem those who lived in the past and to recreate all "it was" into a "thus I willed it" -- that alone should I call redemption. (On Redemption II.20).

To redeem what is past in man and to recreate all "it was" until the will says "Thus I willed it!" "Thus I shall will it!" -- this I call redemption... (On old and new tablets III.12, §3).

Since the will remains powerless to will backwards and thereby redeem the past, Zarathustra's solution, better yet, the solution offered to him by life as she overcomes herself yet again, is to make time itself a circle. By willing forward, which the will is quite capable of doing, the will recaptures or wills the past, forever.

Critique

In this paper, I have not been concerned with the question of whether or not Nietzsche understood the thought of eternal return to be cosmological, metaphysical, ontological, existential or simply the test of someone's Übermenschlichkeit, as Magnus does. I do not agree with Lampert, however, that the thought of eternal return replaces the goal of the overman in Zarathustra.¹⁷ Since I tend to regard the overman as the person who is actually capable of, that is, actually has the power to accept the thought of ER and all of its horrific and joyful implications, I regard ER primarily as a test or minimally at least as a criterion of someone's yes-saying capabilities and abilities (that is, their strength, courage, and health).¹⁸ To this extent, Zarathustra becomes an overman precisely at the point when he overcomes his nausea at the thought of return and incorporates his blanket affirmation of life that ER entails. And the fact that the vision of ER is characterized as the "vision of the loneliest" is important to note since in the first reference to ER in Nietzsche's published writings (Gay Science 341: The Greatest Weight), we are asked how we as individuals would respond individually and personally to a demon creeping into our loneliest loneliness. I think this is Nietzsche's way of describing the moment when true individuality (akin to Heidegger's authenticity) is possible, a time when God as permanent witness is no longer possible, so that by accepting ER as one's own most thought, we are able to cull an ascending individual from the descending herd. In other words, the thought of eternal return is the most individuating of all possible thoughts.

In conclusion, I would point out that more often than not, solutions to riddles require a shift in one's paradigm, that is, a shift in one's way of thinking about something old or commonplace.¹⁹ Nietzsche utilizes a riddle in Zarathustra in such a way that its solution requires just such a paradigm shift. I have taken it to be obvious and without need of proof that the solution to the riddle is, in fact, the eternal return of the same and that ER solves Zarathustra's riddle by re-thinking the nature of time from something linear and absolute to something that is circular. "Time itself is a circle". However, many of the problems posed and questions asked about ER are either misguided problems or moot questions simply because they fail to comprehend Zarathustra's solution (that time is a circle) radically enough. Indeed, it seems as if Nietzsche failed to comprehend just how radical the solution was to his own riddle because, like Lampert's misguided dwarf, Zarathustra seems to describe temporal events as if they recurred in cycles for what happens "next" time around, as it were, is thought to be the same as what happened "last" time around, relatively speaking of course. The image which Nietzsche uses to capture this cyclic, and therefore essentially linear, view of time is the hourglass turned over and over again.

¼[T]here is a great year of becoming, an enormous great year, which must like an hourglass, always turn around again from the start, so that it runs down and runs out from the start: so that all these years are the

same as each other, in what is biggest and in what is smallest too¹/₄ (The Convalescent III.13, §2)

I come again, with this sun, with this earth, with this eagle, with this serpent -- not to a new life or a better life: I come back eternally to this same, selfsame life, in what is greatest as in what is smallest, to teach again the word of the great noon of earth and man, to proclaim the overman again to men (ibid).

What returns, Zarathustra says, is “the same”: the same moonlight, the same spider, the same you and I, the same small human beings. However, I would suggest that claiming that the same things return again and again with each turn of the cosmic wheel or resetting of the cosmic hourglass is simply to lapse back to thinking in the old temporal framework in which time is linear and absolute and to fail to realize just how radical it really is to think time as a circle.²⁰ What we have here is repeated cycles of the same events and therefore one series at one time being repeated, albeit exactly, in a different series at a different time. However, to claim, as Nietzsche seems to, that the next time around things will be the same as they are now is beside the point since there can only be a “next” time, a repetition, if time is linear. Neither concept makes sense if time is truly understood to be a circle.

ENDNOTES

¹Presented at the Argumentation and Rhetoric Conference, Brock University, May 13, 1999.

²Heidegger, Nietzsche: The Eternal Return of the Same, Volume Two, trans. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper and Row, 1984, pp. 37-44 explicitly addresses the question why Nietzsche would use riddles rather than arguments. Given the deliberate parody of Christianity and the Bible which one finds in Zarathustra and especially the number of allusions to biblical texts, it is difficult not to suspect that Nietzsche is drawing a parallel between Zarathustra and Paul. After Paul’s vision, for example, he had to convalesce for three days and nights. Zarathustra convalesced for seven. Paul’s rapturous vision of the third heaven (2 Cor. 12, 1-4) is quite reminiscent of Nietzsche’s vision of eternal return in August 1881 on the shore of Lake Silva Plana. Paul as an apostle was someone who was sent with a message. Zarathustra begins his journey in the Prologue with a message/gift to mankind.

³Nietzsche even suggested that “Everything about women is a riddle, and everything about women has one solution: that is pregnancy” (On Little Old and Young Women, Z I, 18; p. 66). The riddle at the gateway is not the only riddle in Zarathustra by any means. Although I don’t find, as Lampert does, a riddle on every page, Zarathustra does unriddle, or crack the nut as he says, posed by the magician (Z IV, 5), the ugliest man (Z IV, 7), the voluntary beggar (Z IV, 8), the daughters of the

wilderness (Z IV, 16). Laurence Lampert, *Nietzsche's Teaching: An Interpretation of Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986). All quotations from Zarathustra are taken from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Press, 1972).

4What walks on four legs in the morning, two in the afternoon, and three in the evening? Answer: human beings as they age.

5Emerson, *Essays, First and Second Series*, "On History" (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), p. 7.

6Albeit through the soothsayer who represents descending life or life on the decline.

7Lampert, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

8Lampert sees ER as Nietzsche's means for overcoming the spirit of Socrates as it manifests itself in the soothsayer (Schopenhauer) who represents the diminished or "dwarfed" version of that tradition (Lampert, pp. 162-163). Lampert offers a very interesting argument for this claim which is based on the chronological order of four passages in *Gay Science*: life is a woman (section 339), the dying Socrates (section 340), the first reference to ER in Nietzsche's published writings (section 341), and *Zarathustra* begins (section 342). See Lampert, pp. 167-169.

9Lampert suggests that the future represents open possibilities, the present actuality, and the past necessity. While the will is free to create within the future, the past, being necessary, is not subject to alternation. So what the will cannot do is alter the past.

10And life itself confided this secret to me: "Behold", it said, "I am that which must always overcome itself" (*On Self-overcoming* II.12). "Life wants to climb and overcome itself climbing" (*On the Tarantulas* II.7).

11Indeed, life, it seems, always devises or invents [erfinden] the means for its own overcoming. Zarathustra says that the peak and abyss are joined together and that "It is only out of the deepest depths that the highest must come to its height" (*The Wanderer* III.1). "My abyss speaks, I have turned my ultimate depth inside out into the light" (*The Convalescent* III.13, §1). I would suggest that the thought of ER which constitutes the highest possible affirmation of life is generated by life in its utmost depths of despair and melancholy following God's death and the advent of nihilism, that is, the belief that nothing whatsoever has any value or meaning. It is conceivable, especially given the fact that poets lie too much and that Zarathustra is a poet that Zarathustra does not really believe in the "truth" of ER. This possibility is buttressed, I think, by two passages in the text where the solution to life's riddle is said to be devised or invented by the will: "Willing liberates; what means

does the will devise [erfinden] for himself to get rid of his melancholy and to mock his dungeon?" (On Redemption II.20); "Zarathustra replied and smiled at his animals. How well you know what comfort I invented [erfinden] for myself in seven days! That I must sing again, this comfort and convalescence I invented for myself" (The Convalescent III.13, §2).

12In BGE, Nietzsche says that he who reaches his goal transcends it eo ipso. One should suspect therefore that the overman will have to be surpassed by an over-overman, over and over again especially given the fact that life must overcome itself again and again. Hence there can be no final goal for Nietzsche, including the overman.

13And that is the great noon when man stands in the middle of his way between beast and overman and celebrates his way to the evening as his highest hope: for it is the way to a new morning" (On the gift-giving virtue I.22 § 2). I think it is fairly obvious from this that the highest hope that mankind has for its future is the overman.

14Compare: "And this is your reality: "Everything deserves to perish" (On the Land of Education II.14) and "All is false" (On the Way of the Creator I. 17). In Schopenhauer as Educator, Chapter 4, Nietzsche says, "All existence which can be denied deserves to be denied; and to be truthful means to believe in an existence which could in no way be denied and which is itself perfectly true".

15Compare the following set of questions: "What was it that happened to me? How did I redeem myself from nausea? Who rejuvenated my sight? How did I fly to the height where no more rabble sits by the well? Was it my nausea itself which created wings for me and water-divining powers?" (On the Rabble II.6). Interestingly enough, the answer is yes: "...nausea itself creates wings and water-divining powers" (On old and new tablets III.12, §14).

16"...you [time] have taken from me the irretrievable [the past]" (The Tomb Song II.11)

17Lampert, op. cit., p. 204.

18See Eric Oger, "The eternal return as crucial test", *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* (XIV, 1997), 1-18 as well as Aaron Ridley, "Nietzsche's Greatest Weight", *ibid.*, 19-25.

19A riddle from thirty years ago which was difficult to solve then but easy to solve now demonstrates the shift in paradigm. That we are presently comfortable within the new paradigm is what makes the riddle so easy to solve. Riddle: A child needs an operation. The surgeon at the hospital says, I can't operate on this child because the child is related to me. The surgeon is not the child's father, grand-father or brother. What relation then is the surgeon to the child? Answer: the surgeon is the

child's mother. Thirty years ago, it would have been very difficult to conceive that a woman could be a surgeon and therefore solving this riddle would have required a radical shift in paradigm.

20See Alistair Moles, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Nature and Cosmology* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), especially pp. 310-315.
